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The Hoopa Indian Story

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Northwestern California has a wild, characteristic beauty. Shut off from the great Sacramento Valley by the Coast range, spurs of which run laterally down to the ocean, it is even yet almost inaccessible, while in the early days it was a country by itself. The steep mountains, impenetrable forests of giant redwoods, open plateaus covered with native grasses, rapid rivers tumbling over boulders and through deep cañons, ferns of enormous size, the rugged coast line, are never forgotten after a summer in Humboldt County.

More than fifty years ago a little party of white men came over the mountains from the Shasta country searching for gold. They found the coast regions full of Indians who gave them a most hearty welcome. These Indians were living in comfortable, permanent homes, which were remarkably well-built, though the only tool used was the stone adz. Abundance of the best kind of food—dried seeds from the native grasses, acorns, fish, game and deer—had produced a strong, vigorous race, whose social development was shown in good laws and government, and whose artistic temperament found scope in the weaving of exquisite baskets. Soon other white men with their families came up by sea from San Francisco. The Indians were greatly pleased with them, admired them and were exceedingly friendly. The chief had two sons, who were taken into the family of

one of the white men. The old father begged his boys to stay with him, but they were persuaded by the promise of guns and books and a good time generally, and were keen to go. For a trifling fault one was shot dead in his brother's presence, but the other from the first was a general favorite. He was much with the white man's children, and with them learned to read and write. Several years later he was converted at a Methodist camp meeting on the Eel River, and his character and life became such that ungodly white men said, "There is no discount on Billy Beckwith's piety."

Before long one of the most bloody Indian wars broke out. There was cruel wrong on both sides. It was literally the time when every man's hand was against his brother, when every white man felt it his duty to shoot at sight every Indian, and every Indian knew every white man was his bitter enemy. Through it all Billy was the only man trusted by both whites and Indians (At this time occurred what Hittell characterizes as "one of the foulest deeds that blots the pages of history—the horrible and revolting butchery known as the massacre of Indian Island.") At the close of the war the Hoopa reservation was set aside—a valley ten miles long, from a mile to three miles wide, surrounded by almost impassable mountains and drained by a beautiful river. But the difficulty was to get the Indians there. Billy volunteered. The winter was one of unusual severity, but

in the heavy rains of that stormy year Billy went through the deep forests hunting up the little bands of fugitive Indians, and by repeating to them the promises that had been made to him he finally got them all on the reservation.

The years passed by.

Hoopa was continued as a military reservation, probably because no one cared enough to call the attention of the Washington authorities to the inconsistency. All the Indian reservations, except this one, are in charge of the Department of the Interior. The nearest town was forty miles away; only a rough wagon trail led over the steep mountains which were the valley's barriers. It was considered "a good place to break in raw recruits," which were changed every three months. The officers were allowed to have their families—not the soldiers. There was no law, no restraint, other than the whim of the man in command; all the promises made to Billy Beckwith were forgotten, and the moral condition was indescribably bad.

Now Billy loved the prettiest Indian girl in the valley and won from her the promise to be his wife; they were married at the reservation according to Indian customs, and then he took her to Eureka, on the coast, sixty miles south, where they were duly pronounced man and wife according to the laws of the state of California. Billy worked hard and had accumulated some property. Three babies came to gladden the Christian home,

which he was so proudly maintaining on the reservation. But the little wife was gay and attractive, and the white men's tongues flattering and seductive, and one night when Billy came home to supper he found only three babies. Out of boxes slung over the back of his pack-horse he made a warm nest for each little girl, and with the baby bundled up in his arms and leading his horse he walked ninety miles to Eel River, where he went directly to the home of a white woman, a good Methodist, an old, true friend.

And time passed.

Billy, up in the Eel River country, was supporting his children, while down in the beautiful Hoopa Valley the shadow of blackest night had settled. When things got very bad the authorities were glad to send for Billy to come and settle disputes. He had done everything in his power to call the attention of the Washington authorities to the condition of the Indians. He had tried to get white men to write, but all were making too much out of the post to care to disturb it. About this time he wrote: "Many years ago there was Indian war. At that time the promise was made, 'You shall have Hoopa Valley for your home,' and we have waited thirty years for each to have his portion, and be allowed to work it and become citizens. We have been kept in wicked hands, no one to teach good things, only wicked things. Many have died, others are suffering now. Is this my treatment at the hands of my

white brothers for all my good will and deeds to them? If so, I will draw my blanket over my head, and without another word quietly submit even unto death. Take my life and let me sleep with my fathers, and give my land to my white brothers, for there is no place for the poor Indian."

In 1889, Mrs. Dorcas J. Spencer of San Francisco, evangelist for the W. C. T. U., was speaking at Hydesville. She was soon conscious of hungry eyes eagerly fixed upon her, and she saw that they belonged to a great strong man of decidedly Indian features, who was cuddling up close to him a little girl. After the meeting he came directly to her and said, "Will you go with me and see my people? You represent many Christian women, you are not a politician, you can talk, you are not afraid to tell what you see, you are not working for money. Just come with me and see my people and then tell the government, and they will believe you—no one believes us!"

Could any Christian resist that plea? She had a wild, rough journey of thrilling interest by mule-back, over unfrequented trails so that no word of her coming should reach the post, while Billy's thoughtful care and tenderness alleviated as much of the inconvenience and fatigue as possible. They finally reached Hoopa. Providentially the visit came at the one time of the year when Mrs. Spencer could go about with freedom, for it was the Annual Inspection, and commander and sol-

diers were all away. She went from home to home listening to heart-breaking tales of wrong and outrage. Men and women eagerly came to the little woman wearing the knot of white ribbon and implored her help. Sunday morning she held a gospel meeting to which the Indians came in crowds. Billy was the interpreter. His rich voice, personal magnetism and deep piety threw a charm into the service which will never be forgotten. In the afternoon one of the most significant and solemn meetings was held. The young men alone came and demanded help from her for their sisters. That was their plea. They wanted them saved from their mothers' fate. Their implicit trust in Mrs. Spencer's ability to do this was pathetic. They asked for the white man's laws, the white man's schools and the white man's church, and closed with the plea Billy had first made, "You represent many, many women, you can talk"—and talk she did.

Returning to San Francisco she wrote to President Harrison and to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. That she had made no small stir was soon evident by letters from Washington to leading San Francisco men, asking who Mrs. Dorcas J. Spencer was. Learning that she was a Christian, a Presbyterian, a prominent W. C. T. U. officer and identified with local missionary and philanthropic work, and that her integrity and character made her testimony reliable, Dr. Daniel Dorchester was sent from Washington to in-

vestigate Hoopa Post. His report not only confirmed every word Mrs. Spencer had written but went much further. As a result the post was abolished, the barracks turned into a boarding and industrial school, and much of the old cause for evil removed.

But Billy's prayer was only half answered, for there was as yet no positive Christian teaching. His girls were now in school at Salem, Oregon, and he was employed as veterinary at the Agency. But his heart was in Hoopa, and as three times each day he reverently asked a blessing he added the petition that God would send the bread of life to his people.

Billy is sick unto death. In the delirium which is slowly sapping away his strength he fancies himself surrounded, not by angels of the white man's conception, but by sweet-faced women each wearing the little knot of white ribbon. One of them had given him his ideal of all loveliness, truth and honor, and had done more for his people in three years than all other white people had done in half a century.

Billy's prayer is answered. Missionaries are in the beautiful Hoopa Valley, and after long waiting the Indians have the white man's laws, the white man's schools and the white man's church.

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[Miss M. E. Chase and an assistant are missionaries of the Woman's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church now in charge of this work, and their support is provided by the Synodical Society of California.]